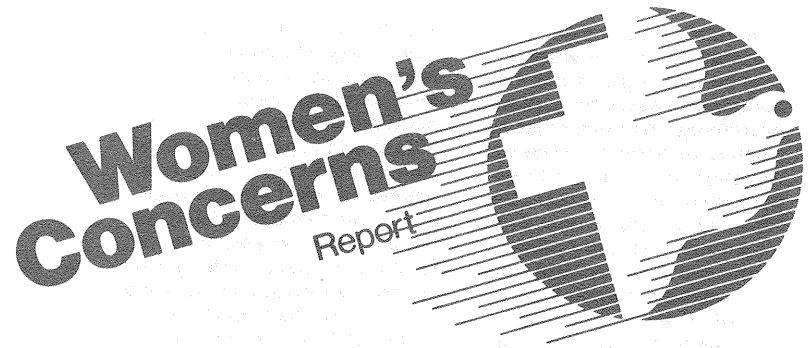


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## Domestic Help: Seeking a Christian Response

Washing, cooking, cleaning and childcare—these have traditionally been called woman's work. And just as women have been undervalued in the past, so has women's work been frequently near the bottom of the work heap in terms of prestige and salary. A recent radio report stated that if we show how much we value various services by how much we pay for them, then child care is not valued very highly. We pay child care workers less than garbage collectors or most other blue collar workers.

In North America, just as women are gaining in value in the job market, so traditional woman's work is gaining in value. Good housecleaners can get a respectable hourly wage. Babysitting still may not pay well, but good day-care workers, who attempt to educate as well as watch children, are gaining in salary and prestige.

In many developing countries, however, women and women's work are still near the bottom of the salary and prestige scale. I am convinced that Christians in development and mission work overseas need to take a close look at the subject of domestic help, and the issues that it raises.

It has been my experience in seven years with MCC that many MCCers employ some type of domestic help, from baby sitters to full-time helpers. We personally have employed baby sitters, and while we were in Jamaica Lurline Grey washed our clothes for us.

I suspect that MCCers pay at or slightly above the local going rate, and that generally MCCers are comparably good to work for, trying to show compassion and fair treatment, going beyond the norm in terms of benefits. Yet I also suspect that most of us find ourselves hiring domestic help with some uneasiness, and without really having clarified the questions that this type of employer/employee relationship raises.

In the book *Between Women*, Judith Rollins, writing on domestic help in the United States today, points out that the relationship between helper and boss is not an ordinary employer/employee relationship. Because of the personal nature of the work, the relationship is more personal and emotional than other types of work relationships.



In seeking articles for this issue of *Women's Concerns Report*, I used Rollins' book to form the following questions, which I sent to the writers.

—Is the employer/employee relationship found in domestic service intrinsically just or unjust?

—Does the employer expect deference from the employee ("Yes Ma'am" language, etc.)?

"Marketing (in Somalia) in a crowded open-air market is time consuming and hot. One bargains for everything. Almost everything one buys must be cleaned or sifted in some way. Although water is said to be pure, we filter it as a precaution. Washing machines cost \$1,000 for a simple spin-dry model. Floors are dusty several hours after washing and clothes cannot be worn very long because of the hot, dusty and sticky weather. This time I

spend more time at home but have many additional responsibilities connected with MCC administration, not to mention hosting many visitors. This all adds up to a situation in which some kind of help is a necessity, and I haven't even once questioned whether it is a luxury. I am just very thankful for the help. The only thing that comes close to a luxury is being able to walk away from the noon dishes to take a short rest."  
—Ardith Frey, former MCC Somalia, in MCC *Intercom*

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—Does the employer treat the employee maternally (treating the employee as a child, assuming responsibility for the employee as though he or she could not care for him or herself)?

—Is the giving of unreciprocated gifts (common in domestic service) a form of maternalism?

—Are working conditions, wages and benefits given to employees in domestic service fair?

—Is there a Christian response to the subject of domestic service?

Two of the articles in this issue are written by women, Lurline Grey and Jacinth Richards, who are or were employed as domestic helpers by MCCers in Jamaica. Katherine Friesen writes about her experiences as a domestic helper in Canada 57 years ago. Janice Bauman, formerly an MCCer in Indonesia, writes about her experience as an employer of domestic help overseas, and her experience as a part-time domestic helper in the States.

Gann Herman and Gail Erickson both write about their experiences as employers of helpers, in southern Africa and Nepal respectively. And Anna King is an Amish woman who works as a domestic helper in Lancaster County, Pa., who shared her experiences with Emily Will.—*Janet Panning*

**Janet Panning served with MCC in Jamaica from 1981-1984 and in Kentucky from 1984-87. She and her husband, Steve, and two children, Megan, 6, and Molly, 4, currently live in Lansdale, Pa. They attend Plains Mennonite Church. After college, Janet worked six months as a domestic helper.**

  
by Janice Bauman

## Perspective from Both Sides

In our three years with MCC Indonesia and in travelling through other Asian countries visiting missionaries, I have observed many differing attitudes towards domestic helpers. The irony is that now I am a part-time domestic helper in Philadelphia, Pa. I haven't put the two situations together until recently, because they seem to be such a world apart.

We worked in two village projects in Indonesia, trying at first to subsist without domestic help and suffering greatly for it. Work in Third World villages is usually "from scratch" and very, very time-consuming. To expect to do one's own laundry, marketing, cooking and child care—and carry on a ministry besides—would be an exhausting and superhuman task. (And yet it's done every day by the village women.)

In our first project in Kalimantan, a recently widowed woman from our church did our cooking and laundry. She prayed and ate with us at lunchtime and we felt we treated her as our equal. In many ways I was awed by her because she was older than me and so much more experienced in village life. Because she was Christian and we attended the same church, we were more friends than employer/employee.

My husband and I did feel pressure to give gifts to her family at Christmas and so gave new dresses to her two daughters. I think from the legacy of past missionaries in that area of the world certain perpetuated maternalistic attitudes are just taken for granted—like helping with health costs and giving unreciprocated gifts.

At our second project in Sulawesi, we again tried to survive without household help for about a month, but spent all our days maintaining our family's household needs and rarely getting anything else accomplished. This time we

**"Many employers don't want to hear about raising wages—they say they're feeding her, giving her old clothes. But she didn't go there to be fed, she went there to work for her children, for the survival of her family."  
—South African domestic worker**

hired a neighbor's daughter, a 14-year-old Balinese girl who was very shy but quite capable. She would not eat or socialize with us, possibly because of age and cultural differences. This hurt us and we missed that fellowship bond with her that we had with our Christian helper in Kalimantan.

As time went on, she became more comfortable with us, talking more and even eating with us a few times. She also reciprocated gifts by bringing us fruit from her garden, which delighted us.

We had occasion to visit many missionaries in India—including my husband's parents, who had worked there for 35 years. Possibly because of the British colonial heritage, we saw more subservience and maternalism in the employer/domestic helper relationship, even among missionaries. We were quite taken aback to visit one American couple in Agra and hear the woman comment, "Servants! They just aren't like they used to be!"

In another single woman missionary's home, the cook would stand behind us at the table, towel draped formally over his forearm, and quickly jump forward to serve us as we finished each course. He also would come into our bedroom every morning and serve "bed tea," an ornate breakfast on a tray. Needless to say, I was quite awed by it all.

My husband's parents had a closer relationship with their cook. Even though the cook never ate with them (he and his family lived close by on the compound), the three of them would talk in Gujarati as equals—he even scolded them if they came in late for supper.

Since returning from overseas work, I have started cleaning people's homes in Philadelphia for extra income while my husband attends graduate school. My situation is a little different from overseas because I am not doing such personal things as cooking and serving meals, but rather am cleaning housing, usually 2½ to three hours per week.

So far nobody has instructed me to enter by the back door or to call them "Mrs. ...." instead of by their first name. If they did request such deference, I possibly wouldn't work for them. I view my job as a professional service and feel quite equal to the people I work for, even though financially they are on a very different strata. Maybe if I had received only an eighth-grade education and had worked only in domestic situations all my life I would feel differently.

Professional career women who are about my age seem a



bit uncertain as to how to relate to me—as a friend or a domestic employee. They usually don't talk much and try to stay out of the way when I am there. Older women seem more comfortable with the employer/employee relationship and also more maternalistic—often giving me old toys and clothes for my children. They likely do not expect me to bring them some old clothes in return!

I feel much more useful and happy cleaning a family's house where I am really needed—when both parents have to work, for example, or the home is headed by a single parent. Such persons are overwhelmed by their daily tasks, with their houses obviously suffering from it. I don't like to clean spotless houses where there is a lot of conspicuous wealth and leisure and I must search in vain for a speck of dust. It seems like such a waste of time, a pampering of already coddled individuals.

My best experiences have been working for Christian families. Then I feel we mutually perceive ourselves as "equals" with gift reciprocity, no maternalistic feelings and a just Christian fellowship. That is the ideal employer/employee relationship.

**Janice Bauman, her husband and three children, ages 1½, 3 and 5, are presently living in Philadelphia, Pa.**

"First and foremost, all domestics (interviewed) concurred that employers appreciated some forms of deference and outward signs of subservience. As domestics talked in detail about this aspect of the relationship I came to realize this formed the essence of the employer/employee relationship."  
—Judith Rollins, *Between Women*



by Katherine Friesen

## Domestic Work in the Depression Era

I worked on and off in three households in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan from 1929 to 1936. I was a young teen-ager from a large farm family. The Depression years set in. Farm income was very low. My sister and I decided to go out to make our own living to ease the situation at home.

At that time many Russian Mennonites were immigrating to Canada. Many of the young immigrant women went to the cities to seek employment. In so doing they helped their families get established on farms and pay back enormous traveling debts to the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. Life was difficult for these young women, not knowing the language or the Canadian way of life. Unlike me, they had no choices. For me it was not only the need to earn money but a desire for adventure that led me to the city.

I worked in three different households. The duties and wages were more or less the same in each. Work began at 6 a.m. and lasted until 8 or 9 p.m. Wages averaged \$20 a month. Because of the large influx of immigrants looking for work, employers could hold the wages low. Before long, Mennonite women built a reputation for cleanliness, submissiveness and honesty so they got the better jobs.

We were called maids and were treated as servants. We had to address our employers by "Mr." and "Mrs.," or if it happened to be "Dr.," and the children by their first names.

The work included everything there is to do in a house with a family. I was given special instructions on how to serve meals. By noon my cleaning was to be finished. Then I had to get into my uniform—black dress with white collar and cuffs and little white cap. These were to be kept immaculately clean and starched.

The door between the kitchen and dining room was to be closed at all times. When summoned by a bell, I entered

only to change the courses. I always ate my meals alone in the kitchen after they were finished.

My sleeping quarters was usually a make-shift room in the basement. I entered the house by the back door. When I cleaned and replenished laundry upstairs, I used a narrow stairway leading from the kitchen. The front entrance and the carpeted winding staircase in the front hall were not for servants to use.

The rule was that the servant should get Thursday afternoons and two Sunday afternoons a month free. There was more trouble with this than anything else. Usually an extra amount of work was found that had to be done on Thursday, so my half-day started at 3 or 4 p.m. I was not to stay out after 10.

We never heard in those days of paid holidays. We got no holidays. Our transportation was walking or riding the street cars. Never was I given a ride with my employers in their car, even if they went in the same direction.

I was treated as a mature adult, though. There were no gifts or bribes, but they let me know that they paid dearly for my service. That made some girls feel guilty and they tried harder to please and often gave up their days off.

Each family that I worked for had a lifestyle of its own, with distinct attitudes towards the servant.

The first family I worked for was Christian—so they said. I was made to feel more like a servant there than any other place I worked. They went to church every Sunday morning. I cooked a special big dinner then. Usually on my days off I was told how privileged I was, and that she would have to work so hard in my absence. The family's three high-school children were friendly and appreciated me.

Another couple I worked for was kind and considerate. He was a lawyer and his wife a semi-invalid. They did not claim to be Christians, never went to church or read the Bible, but he knew the Scriptures.

They knew my stance, though, and said I could go to church every Sunday morning, come home to cook their lunch and then have the rest of the day off. I could also have conversations with them. When they went away for a few days, I could have guests in. It was much more relaxed and enjoyable.

The third place was a family with five daughters, some



## Women

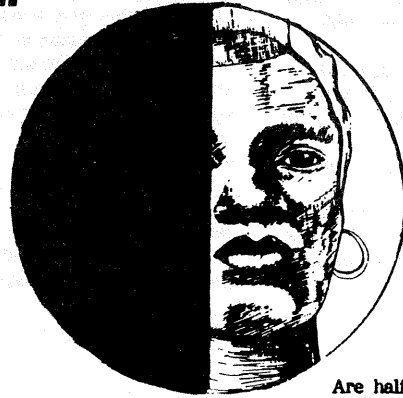
younger, some older than I. They were all friendly, but kept their distance. Work was very precisely planned. She wrote out a menu for one week. I made the meals accordingly. Everything seemed so regimental. My work as well as my days off went as by the clock.

For some time I did day work. I lived in a rented room and had to find employment. It was the most difficult work, like house cleaning in spring and fall. Since I was paid by the hour I was pushed to get it done in a short period of time. Those jobs were usually three or four hours and the pay was 25 cents an hour. I could not afford to ride the street car, so I trudged back, sometimes a couple of miles. No one would ever think of driving the maid home in their car.

Later in life I realized how I had benefitted by this training. I had learned to be submissive, considerate and kind (even if at that time it was often difficult). I learned not to expect rewards or "thank you's" for duties performed. I was disciplined to rise and retire at certain hours and to work out a system to get work done in the least time.

These people all spent a lot of money for groceries (compared to us on the farm), so I learned a lot about culinary art, which I appreciate to this day.

**Katherine Friesen and her husband, J. D. Friesen, both in their late 70s, live in Abbotsford, British Columbia, where they attend Bakerview Mennonite Brethren Church. They are the parents of three sons and a daughter, Dorothy Friesen, who is coordinator of Synapses in Chicago. Part of Katherine's earnings as a domestic enabled her to attend Bethany Bible School. She did not graduate, however, and had to give up her dream of becoming a pastor when her younger brothers needed help in their schooling.**



Are half  
the world's people . . .



Do two-thirds  
of the world's working hours . . .



And own only  
one-hundredth of the world's property . . .



Receive one-tenth  
of the world's income . . .

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by Jacinth Richards

## A Jamaican Woman

Most of my employers are just and they do know how to treat their employees. I have no problem working with them as most are with MCC and they are quite understanding. They treat me as a person and not so much as the helper. They don't really look to me for any special respect; for example, to answer "Yes, Ma'am" or "No, Sir." I do address them as "Mrs." and "Mr." or "Miss," but yet they don't mind if I just call them by first names.

My employers have never treated me as a lesser person or as a child. They are kind and always interested in my welfare and are willing to help me if I need their assistance. But they never act as though I can't manage or that they are responsible for me.

The giving of gifts is occasional. It does not happen unless it's birthdays or Christmas, or if it's something that they themselves don't need and they know it would be of some importance to me.

My working conditions are fine. I work as a day worker and I have little or no benefits. I am not entitled to what a weekly worker would be, so if I work for a family for three years and they leave, the law in Jamaica doesn't back a day worker if my employer does not pay me any (severance) money. The law would back a weekly worker. I don't think the law is fair.

When you work with MCC there is a Christian response. In many ways my employers always show that they are

good Christians. They always show love. As a helper I do what is asked of me and I try to do my work to the best of my ability, trying to please my employers at all times.

My wages are better than some helpers'. There are helpers who are getting more for their day, but I am satisfied at the moment. I would say I get a yearly raise in pay.

I would not like for my daughter to do the sort of work that I am doing now. That is why I am working so hard to get her through school, because I would like to be real proud of her. I like to hire a helper if and when I can afford it. I do hire a lady to do my washing sometimes.

Christian employers should treat Christian employees as one knowing that we are serving the same God, and God wants us to be loving and kind to each other. Christians should be honest and humble people, so their employers shouldn't find much fault with them.

Jacinth Richards has worked for MCCers in Kingston, Jamaica for the last several years.

## Employer/Employee Dialogue

*In the following article, Jane Andres, former MCC Jamaica co-country representative interviews Lurline Grey, a Jamaican Mennonite woman who works as a domestic helper for MCC in Jamaica. Although Jane was Lurline's employer at the time of the interview, Lurline assured Jane that she would respond frankly and honestly to the questions.*

**Jane:** You've been doing domestic work for 30 years, have you ever wished to do something else?

**Lurline:** Yes. When I was a child, I wanted to be a nurse, to work in the hospital. Unfortunately, it didn't work out, because of my parent's background. They didn't have the money. Mother was a sickly woman. I had to choose what

**"Doing our own work takes time, but we didn't go to the Philippines to do 'important things.' We went to hear what the people were saying, to experience what they were feeling, to learn what they had to teach us, to further appropriate First World-Third World relationships—in short to be servants. How is it possible to be a servant and master at the same time with the same people?"**

**—Dorothy Friesen, former MCC Philippines, in MCC Intercom**

I am doing here, on my own. I also took care of children along with housekeeping. There are times that I enjoy it. It all depends on the type of people that you work for.

**Jane:** You've been with MCC for 15 years. But you worked for someone before that for about 10 years, didn't you?

**Lurline:** I changed jobs quite a few times before I got to MCC. A couple of the employers were nice, but some were not as nice.

**Jane:** Working with MCC you don't have a choice as to your immediate employer. The country representatives change every few years. Have you had good experiences?

**Lurline:** Right from the start it has been a good experience. I enjoy working with MCC. I see no difference between whoever comes. They treat you just the same, nice people to work with. I really enjoy working with MCC.

**Jane:** Is it different working for people who call themselves Christians than for people who don't?

**Lurline:** Yes, there is a difference there, because Christians have more sympathy, or consideration, and I do enjoy working with Christians.

**Jane:** How do you view your wages? This is an unfair thing to ask you.

**Lurline:** At present, my wage is fair. But if I was working for Jamaicans, the wage that you are giving me now I wouldn't get, I'm sure.

**Jane:** Would you want your daughters to be domestics?

**Lurline:** As things are going in Jamaica, I really wouldn't want any of them to do it. But if they are unemployed, and they find good people to work with, then there is no choice.

**Jane:** But if there was a choice, you would want them to choose a different profession?

**Lurline:** Yes.

**Jane:** That's not surprising. If you could, would you hire someone to be your helper, to do your laundry?

**Lurline:** It's kind of ticklish here. Number one, I like to work. I like to keep going. If I could, and there was someone more unfortunate than I am, that I want to help, then yes, I would.

**Jane:** To help them, not because you needed the help.

**Lurline:** Yes, right.

**Jane:** All right. Is the relationship between the employer and employee just or unjust? What does just/unjust mean to you?

**Lurline:** Fair, unfair.

**Jane:** Not just with money, but person to person.



**Lurline:** That is where, when you ask if I want any of my children to do household work, this comes in. In the past, employers used to treat employees unjustly. But this has changed now. They are more considerate. They have to treat their workers kindly because they are dependent on them, in different ways. More ways than one.

**Jane:** Have you talked to other women who are domestic workers, or are you speaking of your own experience?

**Lurline:** My own experience.

**Jane:** Do you ever sit down with other women who do the same kind of work?

**Lurline:** They complain that the wages are low, that they cannot live on the wage that they are getting. It is frustrating to them, but what can they do? They have no choice. They have to keep going.

**Jane:** Do you feel that way? Can you live on your wage? Or do you rely on the other bits of money that come in?



"Trinh became a younger sister to Earl and me and an auntie to the children. Having her at our table every day forced us to speak Vietnamese and hence made it more comfortable for Vietnamese neighbors and friends to join us. Trinh was as responsible as anyone for our intimate understanding of Vietnamese culture—its history, customs, foods, mores and the psychology of the people."

—Pat Hostetter Martin, former  
MCC Philippines, in MCC  
Intercom

"My life has been hard on earth.  
I wish God made me a place to  
live nice in heaven."  
—South African domestic  
worker



**Lurline:** To be frank, the wage that I am getting now I don't expect to get more, according to the work that I am doing. But, on the other hand, I can't live on it alone. The little bits that come in, they really help.

**Jane:** Do your children help with your household costs?

**Lurline:** They chip in with a little, what they have. I couldn't do it otherwise. From the past, MCCers have sent in a little. If it wasn't for them, I don't know how I would manage.

**Jane:** Does the employer expect deference from the employee?

**Lurline:** Well, no, not in these days. But you as the employee, you intend to show some respect for your employer. We have a Jamaican proverb that says, "You have added on the handle to the cup" — the helper has respect for the employer. You want them to feel happy, so you would say "Miss" or like I would say "Sister Jane". I want to show respect. But if they definitely say, "Don't say 'Miss'," then I won't, if they don't like it."

**Jane:** Isn't it fair that the employer call you "Sister Lurline" or "Mrs. So and So"?

**Lurline:** Yes that would be fair. You feel good about each other.

**Jane:** I know we've worked together for four years. You've always called me Sister Jane, and I find it hard to say Sister Lurline, because it takes longer, so out of pure laziness I just say Lurline. Well, I would be happy if you just called me Jane. Because I've always felt it was not quite fair—you go to all that trouble to say Sister Jane to me and I rarely say Sister Lurline except when we're in church.

**Lurline:** You are used to just the plain name.

**Jane:** It is more North American because we usually use just the first names. I always thought it was just a cultural thing.

**Lurline:** When I was a child, my parents taught me what I would call manners for people older than myself. You are not older, but as I said before, you intend to have a certain amount of respect for your employer.

**Jane:** You feel that an employer does expect some deference from an employee - a polite manner?

**Lurline:** Yes, definitely.

**Jane:** Well, I think the employee should expect the same from the employer. And maybe one thing we should have done was settle this when we began working together, and agree to call each other by first names. But since we've worked together for four years, maybe I will try to call you Sister Lurline more often.

**Lurline:** I think you are right there, from the start we should come to agreement.

**Jane:** Because I have sometimes felt disrespectful in not saying the whole thing, although I have not meant to be disrespectful. I wonder if you feel that I am being disrespectful.

**Lurline:** Not at all.

**Jane:** Thank you. Moving on, does the employer treat the employee maternalistically? Have you been treated as a child, as if you were not mature enough to handle your own affairs?

**Lurline:** No, I have never experienced this, because I feel quite capable of handling household work.

**Jane:** How do you feel Christian employers should treat Christian employees?

**Lurline:** Fairly. When I said fairly, I meant to speak to each other nice and warmly, because if he or she does, it will measure back to them. Because I've experienced in the past that employers who treat employees unfairly get that measure back. Because when they are about to leave, they don't leave on good terms. If the employer treats the employee justly, fairly, then they expect to get back the same in return. You can rely on employees who are treated fairly.

I like to be trusted. If I am working with someone and they don't trust me, I am not happy. What's the use of staying? But on the other hand, I have to show them that they can trust me.

I hear of employees who say they are not getting enough pay, so they steal to make up their pay. But to me, if I am not getting enough pay, I would say something. If they can't afford it I would have to seek other employment.

I was working once with a lady, something happened to her and she said she couldn't pay me, but I decided to work



"Domestic workers worry a lot. Say for instance you are looking after somebody's children—but you don't even know what your own children are doing."  
—South African domestic worker

"Once you are a domestic worker, you are no longer a human being. Or a wife. Or a mother."  
—South African domestic worker

for free. She never forgot and made it up back some other time.

**Jane:** Are you thinking of retiring at all?

**Lurline:** I plan to work until my body is worn out, then I will quit. But on the other hand, I wonder if I will be able to quit? The cost of living is high here—you have to just keep going.



by Gann Herman

## Viewpoint:

### From the Southern Africa Context

When I came to southern Africa with MCC in 1983, I had strong feelings against employing domestic help. It is a very hot issue here. I had never been an employer, and I feared the relationship. I had heard stories from African friends about 'white madams' and did not want to be one.

"The giving of unreciprocated gifts places the recipient in the position of a child or a beggar, being too poor, too young or too low in status to be able to participate in the system of exchanges which marks the social boundaries of the donor's group... (Employers) give in order to assert their dominance and their possession of their servant."  
—Whisson and Weil, South African Institute of Race Relations

But I had a teaching assignment, one small child, no laundry facilities, and a husband who worked long hours. I had to have help. Since July 1983 I have had part-time help with child care, laundry and light cleaning. The experience is a mixed one—frustrations and joys.

African women who seek work as domestic servants bring to their jobs all the stories they have heard and family experiences they have had of working for white South African women. It is pretty ugly baggage, and requires a lot of sensitivity, patience and communication before they are willing to begin to set it down.

Discussing household servants is a "generative theme" among expatriates in Swaziland and Lesotho. Whenever wives of diplomats or foreign aid "experts" meet socially, problems with household help is sure to be on the agenda. These women seem very uneasy and defensive regarding how well they treat or pay their servants.

I've observed a lot of maternalism in employer/employee relationships. I'm sure there is some in my own, though I try to minimize it. I am grateful for the Sesotho language; all married women are given the title "me" (mother), and that is what we call each other, so that through the language we can show each other mutual respect.

One of the things I value in my own life is job satisfaction, the opportunity to learn new things, and I struggle with how to create that kind of opportunity for the woman who works in my home. I do try to tell her in verbal and non-verbal ways, that the work she does is very important to our family, and that we value her and trust her.

Gann Herman and her family lived and worked with MCC in Swaziland from 1983-1986. Currently they are with MCC in Lesotho, where Gann is a peace worker and resource person at the Transformation Resource Centre.

"A priest friend introduced us to two girls who wanted to go to college in our town and to work part time. Pat and Lita eat with us, sleep in our house, join in our family decision-making, share in the household work, travel with us to barrios at times, teach us Cebuano and give us some understanding of Filipino culture... Sometimes when they have to spend extra hours at school, we have additional work to do around the house. On the other hand, when Earl and I are traveling,

Pat and Lita become surrogate parents for our children and put in longer hours than usual. It is the give and take of normal family life."

—Pat Hostetter Martin, former MCC Philippines, in MCC *Intercom*

"To give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher... To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination to become a client and subservient... The gift not yet repaid debases the man who accepted it, particularly if he did so without thought of return... Charity wounds him who received..."

—Marcel Mauss (1925)

Women: Co-workers with God"

by Gail Erickson

## Viewpoint: From the Nepali Context

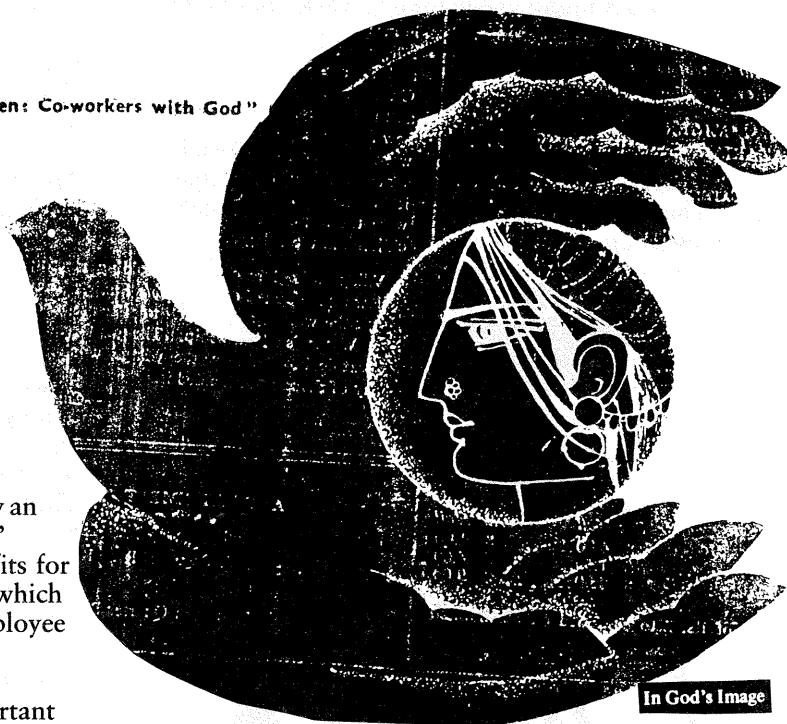
Domestic work is neither just nor unjust. It is basically an employer/employee relationship, a voluntary "deal" between two parties with responsibilities and benefits for each. An employer's treatment can be sub-Christian, which is inexcusable, though it is also possible for an employee to be unbiblical in behavior.

For the employee's own sense of self-respect it is important that she show suitable deference. It is not a sign of low self-esteem to be able to treat another, especially one in authority (in any sphere of life), with respect. We all do in various areas of our life. We may have to adjust ourselves to receive the kind and amount of deference that the person prefers to give; it may be more or less than we're comfortable with. If we receive and give treatment within the bonds of mutual respect and responsibility, however, deference is acceptable.

The extent to which an employer must take care of her employee varies from culture to culture. At times we must fit in; other times we can teach independence. The women in Nepal live their whole lives in protective settings. The fathers and then husbands (or husbands' fathers) make most decisions—the women rarely even make personal purchases.

In that light, our caring for their needs is only expected and we are a parenthesis in their lives. To teach them to "be like us" could be impractical at best, harmful at worst.

The term "maternalistic treatment" causes me to wonder if such actions as the "giving of unreciprocated gifts" or "caring for as a child" don't simply reflect our motherly instincts. We'd prefer giving gifts to giving money, perhaps. "Unreciprocated" is to be expected in a way—they are



signs of appreciation for the helper's "gift of work." When we treat our help as children, in a true sense, then we treat them as our own, in the context of love and care, expecting an ever-growing mature taking up of responsibilities.

Our Christian response to domestic service should be to treat our employees in a way to best help them in the long run, realizing that we are all "employees" of someone (at least of our Lord Jesus Christ!). Domestic service need not be oppressive and humiliating. It can be uplifting in deeper as well as economic ways.

Gail Erickson has been in Nepal with MCC since 1976. Her family has employed domestic helpers to varying degrees over the past 12 years.

"As simplistic as it may seem, I try to use the golden rule when trying to determine a fair balance of work-study-play in our household. For instance, if I don't like to clean the toilet, I don't expect that others will so I do it myself."

—Pat Hostetter Martin, former MCC Philippines, in MCC *Intercom*

"I didn't want most of that junk. But you have to take it. It's part of the job, makes them feel like they're being so kind to you. And you have to appear grateful. That makes them feel good too."

—from *Between Women* by Judith Rollins

by Emily Will

## Anna King: An Amish Domestic Worker

Anna King is a Lancaster County Amish woman whose life goals have always centered on "working in the public." For the past 29 years she has clerked at a farmers' market meat stand three days a week and done housework in private homes another three days a week. She is very happy with her life.

Now 56, Anna housecleans in four different homes. She vacuums, dusts, cleans bathrooms, scrubs kitchen floors, washes windows—jobs which most women would view as drudgery. But Anna asserts, "I enjoy those chores. I love housework. I enjoy going into other people's homes and I do their housework like I would do my own."

Anna works for middle- or upper-income Mennonite women, to whom she was referred by word-of-mouth. "They do not make me feel like a maid," Anna said. "They are my friends and they make me feel like I am their friend. I've never been treated poorly; they've always treated me well."

Anna is especially grateful that the women for whom she works are at home while she is there. They are able to talk and eat together. When she goes to the home of Dawn High, for example, where she was interviewed for this story, the two women chat over a popcorn snack at 10 a.m.

"Compared to others I know not everybody has it like I do," Anna says. "I know there are girls going into homes where people are not there." ("Girls" is Anna's term for single Amish women regardless of their age.)

Anna averages \$5.50 per hour for housework, a wage which she says is the going rate in Lancaster County. She

does not have any paid vacation but can arrange to take time off.

Anna is aware that her life represents a degree of freedom unknown to single Amish women of the past or to married Amish women today. Her face lights up like an eager school girl when she speaks, for instance, of the opportunities she has had to travel. She once took a month-long trip to the West Coast, traveling in a van with a married couple and their child "who took along six of us girls." She has also visited Florida and dreams of someday touring the Canadian Rockies.

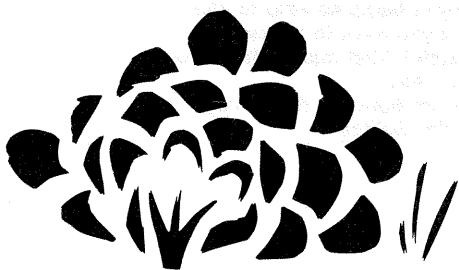
Anna's freedom is likely related to one of the more recent changes among the Lancaster County Amish—their decision to stay in Lancaster County and seek off-farm employment rather than migrate elsewhere in search of farm land.

As long ago as 40-45 years ago, Anna's parents, John and Sadie King, gave up farming and John became a contractor. This trend has greatly accelerated in the 1980's, and some experts believe the practice of taking non-farming jobs could threaten the survival of the Amish community. At a July 1987 "Coping with Modernity" conference sponsored by the Center for the Study of Anabaptism and Pietism at Elizabethtown (Pa.) College, Dr. Mervin R. Smucker raised the specter of disintegration and social disorder among the Amish. Children raised by non-farming Amish parents, Smucker said, are "less respectful, more defiant and rebellious, more self-centered and appear more confused about who they are and what their future role is in the Amish community."

But Anna believes that women, single women in particular, are happier because of the move off farm. When most Amish were still on the farm, single women had very few options. Most became maids for relatives or other large farm families. (For Anna, the term "maid" refers to someone with such a live-in arrangement; she is not a maid but rather "does housework.")

Anna put it this way: Before, "the ladies were stuck on the farm all week. The maids who lived in felt tied down and it wasn't their interest because it was not their family, not their house. So I know we maiden ladies are a lot happier now than we used to be."

Anna doesn't know anyone who is currently working in an Amish home as a live-in maid. "So it's an altogether different outlook for single girls today. They travel a lot more and are happier all around," she says.



Anna senses that some married Amish women envy the freedom that single women like herself enjoy. While she doubts any woman would forego marriage to gain independence, "there are some who after they are married think they had it good when they weren't married. They are tied down to families and aren't the happiest because they say, 'you can just go.' They feel we have freedom."

Among Lancaster County Amish, doing housework for pay does not appear to carry the low status such work does in the mainstream culture. The options in off-farm work for Amish women include domestic work and employment in farmers' markets or restaurants, Anna says.

"The domestic worker is not looked down upon. They feel it's just your choice. Years back they didn't want girls in homes because of the influence of things they'd see there, like TV. But they don't look at it that way anymore. The Amish are more broad-minded now and accepting of outsiders since they know there's not enough work among the Amish," Anna explains.

Anna is somewhat concerned that younger girls prefer to work in restaurants rather than do housework. She believes that housekeeping is integral to solid home and family life and believes younger women need experience and practice in it.

"Some are afraid girls are going to get themselves far removed from cooking, cleaning and being good housewives. My sister-in-law is insisting that her girls do housework at least two days a week so that they will still be good housekeepers when they get married," Anna comments.

Although domestic work carries no stigma among the Amish, Anna understands why it might in the mainstream culture. Because the Amish have just an eighth-grade education, they do not share North American society's valuing of work according to the educational level needed to perform it.

"For their kind of job you have to have an education so a

woman feels she's just doing domestic work. Anybody can do it, anybody can wash a floor" is the attitude displayed by non-Amish, she says.

Anna's economic situation and life environment are also quite different from non-Amish women who traditionally have worked as domestic workers. Usually the latter are

women of color with little education, perhaps with children to support, in a society that measures worth according to what one has and where one lives. As a single woman and part of a community that values simple lifestyles, Anna enjoys a fairly good, self-sufficient economic life.

Anna purchased her parents' home several years ago from her widowed mother. The two women now live together in that home on Main Street in the town of Leola. Anna does not need to support her mother, as her mother has an independent means of support. That's not to say that Anna's life is free of money worries. Two and a half years ago, Sadie had two severe heart attacks and Anna devotes her free time to caring for her aging mother. "I'm just glad that she can be at home by herself so I can go to work," Anna says.

If Anna had daughters, would she encourage them to be domestic helpers? "There's one thing I would stress if I had a daughter out working. I would stress to her not to watch TV. I would not want her to do that," she says. But, yes, she would be comfortable with their working as domestic helpers "because it's good for them to get out. It's good educationwise."

Anna is happy with her life. "It sure is great to get up and feel I am happy to go to this person's home today," she says.

**Emily Will, former Woman's Concerns Coordinator in MCC Akron, is currently working in community development in Gomez Farias, Mexico with her husband, Mark, and their two sons, ages 7 and 3.**

- **Women in Church Ministry**
- **Marian Landis-Funk**, former MCC Akron and MCC England, will graduate from AMBS this month and then she and husband, Ken, will become co-pastors of Saskatoon Mennonite Fellowship.
- **Valery Izbicki** was ordained recently to the ministry at Whitewater Church, Boissevain, Manitoba.
- **Laura Loewen** began as pastor at Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal this summer.
- **Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower** was ordained last spring at Eighth Street Church, Goshen, Ind.
- **Brian and Nancy Bauman** began pastoring at First Church, Reedley, Calif., on Aug. 24. Brian had been pastor at Preston Church, Cambridge, Ontario.
- **Marlene Kropf**, staffperson for congregational education at Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, Elkhart, Ind., addressed the Spring Assembly of Franconia Conference on the theme, "Forming Christians for the Future." Conference sessions were held on May 7, 1988 at Rockhill Mennonite Meetinghouse, Sellersville, Pa.
- **Split Image: Male and Female After God's Likeness** (Eerdmans, 1987) by Anne Atkins addresses the preconceptions many people have about the biblical teachings regarding the relationship between the sexes.

## Letters

- First let me say how much I appreciate *Report*, both for the diversity of the topics covered, and the prophetic stance it takes. However, I was disappointed that in the issue on the farm crisis (No. 77), the crisis was treated mainly as an "act of God" i.e. a crisis that was beyond our control, and therefore dealt with on an emotional and spiritual level, by an individual or family.

The farm crisis is a public issue, brought on by certain political and economic policies. Treating this crisis in a privatistic way does not encourage the practice of analysis and public participation that is needed to address this and other similar crises. Some of the writers mentioned that they had been prompted to study and analysis, and Eileen Pankratz asked penetrating questions.

I would have liked to see these questions given serious attention. Not that *Report* is the place for a full-blown economic analysis, but it is the place where we can develop a more comprehensive framework by which to understand the crisis. Besides increasing our understanding, such a framework might help farm families to place their own crisis into a larger context and alleviate some of the isolation and sense of failure that they experience.

—Catherine Stewart-Kroeker, St. John's, Newfoundland

- Here is a very long overdue contribution. I have been receiving *Report* for many years. It consistently speaks to issues that are current in my life in such a way as to encourage me to go on. The last 5 1-2 years have been especially lonely as the only Protestant (and only female) clergy in an overwhelmingly Mormon area. So many times the *Report* would come at just the time I needed a reminder that I am not the only feminist Christian in the world!

Even though I work and worship in a different denomination (Presbyterian), I always feel very close to the women who contribute in your pages. In a month I begin a new chapter—staying home with my 21-month-old daughter Elizabeth.

—Alice Ebi Kestler, Parma, Idaho

- Your *Women's Concerns Reports* are always good reading but the most recent one on language (No. 76 Our God-talk:

Images, Idols, Metaphors and Masks) really gets to the core of our image of ourselves as women. Until we can realize the subtlety of what religious language has done to us, we cannot move forward into a shared and mutual relationship with men in the church. Thanks for your good work. I value each issue.

—Barbara Overaa Shannon, Lindsborg, Kan.

Today is the first "day off" I've had for a while and I leisurely read the March-April issue of *Women's Concerns Report* (No. 77 Farm Women in Crisis) before I got out of bed. Wow! What an issue!

While I have appreciated a number of articles in previous *Reports*, this one was solid gold. I'm not a farm woman, but most of us know what it is like to have important dreams shattered. Praise God that such experiences need not leave us without hope. There are new ways of experiencing God in untried territory. Joyce Shutt's and Lois Janzen Preheim's articles topped my list but the others were also much appreciated.

I suspect that when, in the future, the history of recent years is compiled, your paper will be a significant window for insight. The freshness and open honesty of the first-person stories make your paper truly special.

—Ruth Naylor, Associate Pastor, First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, Ohio

## News and Verbs

- **Ingrid Rogers** presented the "gospel of love and justice" and quietly encouraged participants to pray and work for "God's kingdom to come for all" at the annual Peace-It-Together event March 11-13 at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. Rogers, a scholar, peace activist and Church of the Brethren pastor, presented stories of peace to the 170 young people and sponsors from across Canada in a variety of ways: in song, autobiography and sermon.
- **Marlene Kropf**, staffperson for congregational education at Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, Elkhart, Ind., addressed the Spring Assembly of Franconia Conference on the theme, "Forming Christians for the Future." Conference sessions were held on May 7, 1988 at Rockhill Mennonite Meetinghouse, Sellersville, Pa.

- **Christine Wenger Nofsinger** has succeeded **Emily Will** as **Women's Concerns Coordinator** at MCC Akron. **Chris**, her husband, **Gary**, and son **Luke** served with MCC Botswana from 1983-1986.
- **Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Janet Panning**, compiler of this issue.

- After serving 32 years as an associate professor of education and as curriculum librarian, **Elsie Lehman** has retired from the faculty/staff of Eastern Mennonite College. She will be given the distinction of "professor emeritus."
- The author of *A Song in the Night*, **Anna Marie Steckley** was the speaker at the 10th Church Library Workshop held recently at Eastern Mennonite College.
- **Joan Gerig** organized a demonstration against apartheid on June 16 in Chicago. Gerig is the Committee on Women's Concerns representative to the MCC U.S. Peace Section and works for Synapses on South African issues in Chicago.
- Charges of racism and sexism have been leveled at members of Reformation Lutheran Church in Brookfield, Wis. Though the congregational council had recommended that the Rev. Vivane Thomas-Brietfeld be called as pastor, the congregation rejected the black, female cleric by a two-to-one vote. Rev. Thomas-Brietfeld said she hopes the Lutheran bishop will be able to work with the congregation "because when we sin, we need to go in and apply correctives."
- A third major study of whether or not to ordain women is being considered by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Since the early 1970s the worldwide denomination has permitted women to be "associates in pastoral care." Last October, the first gathering of Adventist women who are pastors or chaplains urged that one of their member be included on the Seventh-day Adventist Church Commission to Study the Ordination of Women to Ministry.
- Four women were among the six recipients of Mennonite Mental Health Services scholarships. Receiving Elmer Ediger Memorial scholarships were: **Julie King Keim** of Somerville, Mass. who will study Expressive Art Therapies at Lesley College Graduate School in Cambridge; **Ethel Shank** of Ephrata, Pa. who is earning a masters in mental health nursing at the University of Pennsylvania; **Rachel Yoder** of Hutchinson, Kan., studying psychology at Bethel College in Newton, Kan.; and **Faithe Zercher** of Harrisburg, Pa., a social work student at Temple University, Philadelphia.
- **Hilda Froese Tiessen** became acting academic dean at Conrad Grebel College in May. She is filling in for Rod Sawatsky, who is on a one-year sabbatical leave. A member of the college faculty, Tiessen will continue to teach a few classes and serve as registrar of the graduate program in addition to her new duties.
- **Beverly Suderman** has resigned as assistant to the pastor at Vineland (Ontario) United Mennonite Church. She will enroll this fall at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

*REPORT* is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

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